New Era Begins At Hilton, Colombo: Jerome Auvity Takes Over As GM



The new General Manager of Hilton, Colombo is passionate about people and is adamant to lead his team by example. Jerome Auvity speaks to Udeshi Amarasinghe about his experiences and future plans as he begins his tenure at the Hilton, Colombo.

What were your first thoughts upon hearing about your posting to Hilton, Colombo?
It was a very easy decision for me; I have always wanted to work in Sri Lanka since the time I was based in Singapore. Let me see, after Singapore I did a stint in Korea, Vietnam and Australia. So my desire to work in Sri Lanka dates back to about 10 years ago. I finally got the opportunity when I was in Australia. I heard that Hilton Colombo was free and I put my hand up and said yes, this is the place I've always

wanted to be. The main reason for this is that I was in Sri Lanka 12 years ago to do a presentation on food and beverages to Food and Beverage Managers in the country. Although it was only 2 days, I had a fantastic time and what I did remember of this time in Colombo was the people; the warmth, the smile, the welcoming attitude and personalities of the people in Sri Lanka. People being my passion, I felt Sri Lanka would be a good place for me.

What would you say the highlights are of your career?
I had the opportunity to work for Hilton for almost 20 years. The highlight would be that I worked in 7 different countries. This obviously brought me a lot of experiences; for example cultural experiences with 7 different nationalities, working on 7 different properties, market place and products from old hotels to recently opened hotels. However out of all of that I would say that my greatest achievement has been working with so many different people; from local communities to expatriates living in these countries. I have been fortunate to meet such a diversity of people. As I said before, what I'm passionate about is people. I enjoy being in the company of people, I enjoy developing and working with people, which I guess, is a must in this industry, but maybe I have it in me just a bit more than others.

What was your first impression of Hilton, Colombo?
Dedicated and passionate team, that's what struck me first. Extremely professional and very close to their customers, which is the base and foundation of any hotel. As long as we have a team that's committed to doing well, it makes the task much easier. The hotel itself has a lot to offer in terms of food and beverages and banquet facilities. This is something I'm really excited about because I'm from a food and beverages background.

This is your first posting in South Asia, what do you think your main challenges are?
It's a little bit too early to say, I think at the moment there is a challenge for Sri Lanka in general in terms of arrivals from tourists to investors. So, one of my goals is to get close to the local community, to try and understand their expectations from the hotel and once we understand this we will try our utmost to deliver. Obviously my aim is to try to increase and improve the business. Despite the situation I believe there are opportunities. One of my focuses is that I will try to create some vibes and activities in the hotel, targeting the local community initially and be ready when a better time comes for the country itself. Then I will definitely look into getting back in the game by bringing people into the country and filling up

the hotel.

What lessons will you bring to Hilton, Colombo from your previous postings in the Asia Pacific and South East Asian Region?
Certainly a level of experience from food and beverages ; after working in so many countries and doing quite a bit of activities in these countries related to the food and beverages scene. I think that's something I can bring to the team. One thing I want to reinforce is that we work as a team. Something I have been talking about to the people I work with since I arrived, is that open communication is important. I am available to them and will always listen to what they have to say, what they believe in and what are their views and opinions. Usually when the "new kid on the block" arrives, he has many great beliefs but doesn't obviously consult with the local team, understand what has been done, trialled, not done and whether the team believes in the idea that he brings and consequently support it to make it happen. So again you can bring all these experiences from different countries but you have to listen to the people on the ground. I mean, you always want to try new things and to that extent do not want to be stopped by the team by saying it's never going to work here because of various reasons. You want to always try but you do need to listen to them. What I can bring in is excitement about the business and ask them to drive the business rather than telling them. It has to be a consensus and a team effort.

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What plans do you have for Hilton, Colombo; do you intend to make big changes?
We always plan to make big changes, as floor managers we do need to have big plans. At the moment the situation is such that the big changes might not yet be possible. Yes there are little areas that you can find ways to change. Some little touches in various places in the hotel that we can do quickly, without major financial involvements or restructuring. For big changes I will have to wait a bit longer to understand what is really needed.

People are tending to save more than spend, however Sri Lanka is at an advantage with its budget priced holiday packages, would you try and tap into this market?
Our strategy is to provide value for money. When you look at the product that we

have it’s a fairly good one with good food and beverages, high quality rooms. Therefore we would like to remain in that market. We understand why our customers spend a little bit more than in other locations. I think the budget holiday market is an important market but at the moment we are not looking at strategising in that direction.

What motivates you?
The ability to create, to be creative. People, working for them and with them. Contrary to popular belief, I don’t believe that people work for me, but that I work for them. I want to give them the opportunity to create, to develop new things and to grow. What really drives me in the business is the ability to be innovative and creative. A hotel is like a theme park, theatre play or movie; we constantly need to reinvent ourselves and create excitement in order to give new dimensions and reasons for the customers to come to the hotel. That creativity part drives me a lot. Once you create something new then the rest will fall into place. The team will be engaged and excited, will want to do things and very often the financial aspect will also come through.

What management principles do you follow?
Walk the talk, so often you hear that but are we actually doing it? So my management principle would be that if I say something, let it be the attitude we need to portray to the customers, the behaviour we need to have with our colleagues, all these principles that I believe in, I will first apply them myself. That goes back to walk the talk. When we say that we have to be nice and pleasant to the customers it applies to me as well, walk the talk. The hotel business requires a lot of presence a lot of time with our customers and colleagues as well. Again walk the talk, be around, be seen with your customers and team. I believe that if I’m with them we are like a team. It is like being the captain of a sports team in some shape or form. If I take an analogy and look at Soccer, the captain of the team is not the guy who just runs around with his hand in his pocket on the field; usually he does a fair bit of work and may be more. I apply the same concepts in my management principles.

We are stepping into the New Year, therefore what would you say your immediate plans are?
We need to keep on profiling the hotel, in the best way possible especially in the

local market. For that, I think it will require constant activities in the hotel that targets and interests the local market. To that effect we need to have a presence and we need the support of the media and the press to give new means to talk about us. We have numerous outlets and we are developing activities and packages, we think that people can relate to and refer to, which the media can pick on. Therefore my aim for the beginning of the year is to have formulated enough activities so that people will talk about the hotel.

Would you say that your main target is the local population?
When it comes to food and beverages definitely, this includes Banquets and Events. However when it comes to the room component it is a bit more of a challenge obviously. We are presently doing activities in the room side of the business for Christmas and New Year for which we will be targeting the local community.

What about your family, are they here with you?
Yes,my family has joined me already. My wife is Taiwanese and we have two children; my son is 10 years old and my daughter is 5 years old. They have adapted really well. My wife has discovered quite a few places to go already. I don't have time to go with them quite yet, thus she's compiling a list of activities for me to do. It's a joy to have them around and they are having a pleasant time. It's easy for them because people are so welcoming and warm.

Final thoughts?
Despite the world challenges, we all need to keep our spirits and motivations high and keep on striving to make things happen by any means and efforts. I will strive to bring a different life to the hotel that will be inline with keeping a positive atmosphere in the hotel.



